

# **Playfulness, imagination, and creativity in play with toys: A cultural-historical approach**

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## **Abstract**

The aim of this article is to present a wholeness perspective on the relation between creative imagination and children's activity when playing with toys. This is explored through a case retrieved from a 4-month experimental research project, specifically from a social fantasy play session. In order to analyse and examine children's play, the study builds on a dynamic model of human activity—a Vygotskian approach—placed within a contemporary cultural-historical framework. This is expanded upon with an analytical model that connects creative play with the concept of change in play. In this model of transgression, children's playful activities are understood as the basis for the transformation of play during play. This model offers an opportunity to observe transformations through initiatives and negotiations of the play activity. In the study, toys are conceptualised by types of mediation; that is, as toys used for social fantasy play and as toys used for creative construction play. It is shown that a wholeness perspective on play and changes during play must take into consideration children's transgressions and negotiation of these transgressions. This gives a potential to observe how these act upon cultural traditions and institutional practices as transgressions of the established life-world.

## **Keywords**

Imagination; development; creativity; transgression; negotiation; playfulness

## Perspectives on children's play

Play has a substantial function in children's development in preschool and early school ages (Alcock, 2007; Winther-Lindqvist, 2009). This has been an insight of psychology even from its earliest days, and play has therefore been a focus of study within various psychological traditions. Following Hedegaard (this issue), the different approaches to studying play within psychology can be interpreted as focusing on different aspects of development in play. For instance, psychodynamic approaches in psychology have primarily focused on the handling of emotional responses as represented by Freud's understanding of the function of play. Here play is taken to deal with and control an unpleasant emotional response through playing out a forced repetition of it (Freud, 1955). Cognitive approaches such as that of Piaget (1962) focus on learning and cognitive development within play. The development of imitation and symbolic thought as means for the development of higher mental functioning emphasises a general focus on the effect of the plays on the intellectual development of the child. The cultural-historical approach integrates the unity of the cognitive and emotional in a wholeness perspective of development approaching play as learnt in a historical context and practiced as part of a cultural setting. That is, the child's social situation of development is seen in this approach as the relation between the child, as an emotional and motive-oriented being, and the social setting of his or her activity. That is, play in the activity setting is governed by societal and cultural traditions and institutional practices, and these are transformed into regulating rules of that activity setting. Through play, children explore their environment (Fleer, 2011), their physical surroundings (Raittila, 2012) and their social limits of action (Vygotsky, 2004, this issue). They do this as play opens up an exploration and experience of engaging in a variety of themes and subjects, from personal relationships at home to relationships at school, establishing spheres within reality, and importing areas of interest into the play activity (Schousboe, 1993, 2013).

To illustrate this last point, Fleer (2011) provides an example of a play activity from a science project set in Australian kindergartens. In it, the participating children came from a fishing community and the children's cultural traditions and everyday practices guided the play activity. This guidance was seen through the way the children explored the material, which was quite different from the exploration of the dinosaur theme intended by the kindergarten teachers. The science project was set up with the intention to have children develop scientific concepts through play. However, instead of exploring archaeological, historical, biological, and evolutionary elements attributed to the figurines, the toy dinosaurs were used by the children as boats and islands. Here, the intersection between the shapes of the dinosaurs and the children's everyday lives in the fishing community show how play, creativity, and development are tightly interwoven and dependent on temporal and spatial aspects of practice (see also, Wartofsky, 1979, p. 201). However, when playing with toys, the toys may provide different *affordances* to sustain the play<sup>1</sup>. Playfulness and creativity thereby become central concepts in different settings and can in this way be explored through children's initiatives and participation in playful activities while in interaction with other children and adults.

The focus of this article lies on creativity in relation to children's play with *social fantasy toys* (i.e., toys mediating social fantasy play) in order to explore how the negotiation of the imagined relations offers an opportunity to create cultural traditions and institutional practices. Herein, in accordance with the cultural-historical tradition, children ascribe meaning to toys, which can transgress the physical object the toy represents (Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Vygotsky, this issue). The main point of the article is to present a comprehensive perspective on the dynamic relationship that arises during play between children's activity and the play materials, thereby

suggesting a connection between children's transformation of the play and the development of creative imagination.

The article will initially provide a theoretical foundation and conceptualisation, which is the basis for an experimental study. The central concept is transgression, which influences children's development of creative imagination through play. Transgression and playfulness are operationalised in activities that reflect children's willingness to violate and allow for violations of the play scenario. The design for the playgroup study contextualises the theoretical foundation in a Danish kindergarten. An example from the playgroup study is used to show the way transgression is performed and negotiated. The analysis proposes an analytical model that emphasises transgression as a transformative moment of play.

### The theoretical foundation of a wholeness approach to play

The concept of play is described by Vygotsky as imagination externalised in action allowing children to perform their imagined and otherwise unrealisable desires, in such a way that imagination comes to entail a direction within Vygotsky's play theory. "Henceforth play appears which – in answer to the question of why the child plays – must always be understood as the imaginary, illusory realization of unrealizable desires" (Vygotsky, this issue, p. 7). Play functions as a way to simultaneously imitate parts of the broader social world, the world of tales, the television world, or the adult world with which the child is confronted but of which the child cannot yet be a part. As there is the potential to use play to investigate what is expected in these worlds (e.g., gender, socio-economic situation, family position), situations in the surrounding world or social events in which children participate are brought into the play situation (Elkonin, 2005; Vygotsky, this issue). The rules framing the imaginary situation are rules that children agree upon and which are afforded by known forms of social rituals and everyday practices (Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Fler, 2012). As Hedegaard (this issue) notes, in play, traditions regulate both the rules for play as well as the ways that children transform these rules in a way that makes sense to them. Providing a relational approach to imagination, Schousboe's theory of spheres of reality, illustrated in Figure 1, can be used to construct an analytical model operationalising how, in play, the rules of everyday practices are provided in an imaginary situation (Schousboe, 1993)<sup>2</sup>. Here, rules retrieved from everyday practices form the social situation of play, that is, the rules that the imaginary situation affords.

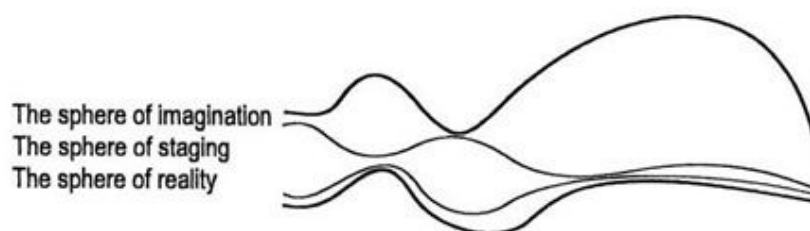


Figure 1. The spheres of reality by Ivy Schousboe (used with agreement, from Schousboe, 2013).

Within the sphere theory, an analytical differentiation of activity has been made which involves the *sphere of imagination* (fantasy play), the *sphere of staging* (where children plan the play), and the *sphere of reality* (everyday life, personal relationships, laws of nature). The spheres may be better understood as three dimensions of the child's social interaction, all of which are simultaneously present in the interaction. However, the child's focus over time changes between the different spheres. When there is no agreement between the children involved, the basis to uphold a predominant focus on the sphere of imagination is not accomplished and children must redirect

their attention to the sphere of staging, negotiating the rules and/or the theme(s) for the play situation before (re)orienting their focus to the sphere of imagination. If the children are not primarily oriented towards the same sphere, the play is ruined (Schousboe, 1993). While the children may focus on the sphere of imagination, none of the other spheres (staging or reality) disappear completely at any point; they can be considered as modes of relations to the world. From a cultural-historical developmental perspective, the sphere of staging can be understood as similar to the way the adult world, to various extents, builds on agreed-upon myths and rules that are not static and thus require renegotiation (Lyotard, 1984). The sphere of imagination can be seen as an expression of a notion of adult creativity in the same way (constructing imaginary models) as collaboration between thinking in concepts and imagination. In accordance with Moran and John-Steiner (2003) and Vygotsky (1998), the construction of imaginary models is argued to be a prerequisite for scientific and artistic creativity. From this perspective on play, children, as well as adults, can be seen as playing or having a playful orientation. Within the sphere theory, the sphere of imagination is “spellbinding” and may lead children to accidentally harm a pet or hurt peers (e.g., when playing “the good guys” or “the bad guys”; Schousboe, 2013). Thus, defining imagination as a dimension of reality and playfulness and focusing on this dimension of Schousboe’s sphere theory both emphasises play as important for the development of imagination and playfulness and offers a more comprehensive understanding of the play setting itself.

### **The dynamics of play**

Schousboe (2013) introduces the concept of playfulness to argue that children’s playful attitude enables the shift from a focus on one sphere (of staging or reality) to a focus on the sphere of imagination. The sphere of imagination can be found to have a spellbinding effect. Being playful can be understood as a captivating state of mind in which children often show great patience “to keep the play going” and avoid ruining the play by leaving the sphere of imagination (Schousboe, 2013). Hedegaard (this issue) provides an example of a child staying in an imaginary bed, waiting to the point of feeling ignored but accepting her part in a birthday play scenario. This is the part she is able to uphold in the constellation of children when she has the role of the birthday child even though she is not the centre of attention, as birthday children usually are, and while waiting fits within this scenario of a birthday. Schousboe (2013) describes how two girls in the “heat of the play” try to convince another girl to drink urine because this action fits well within the scenario of playing doctor and needing bad-tasting medicine. Schousboe notes that when playing, children navigate within the spheres of reality, manipulating interpretive frames from the perspective of other frames. Urine does taste vile, and it does have the consistency of some types of medicine, thereby offering itself to the play scenario through its aesthetic qualities as something that can be reproduced in the play scenario as medicine. For children to be able to create and sustain imaginative scenarios, they must direct their focus to the sphere of imagination, which must become the dominant dimension of the activity (Schousboe, 1993).

In relation to the aesthetic aspects of an object, within the sphere of imagination, playfulness can be perceived as entailing a type of own rules of procedure (Wartofsky, 1979). In this sense, Wartofsky refers to making meaning in a situation and the interaction that objects afford for this. Here, he introduces the concept of an artefact, which includes both tools and language and can be used to understand the transformation of the perception of an artefact in play.

## Toys as artefacts

The understanding of how the child's perception of the toys can change is further developed in the following section by the use of Wartofsky's notion of artefacts. The concept of an artefact, as used here, is defined as "objectifications of human needs and intentions; i.e., as already invested with cognitive and affective content" (original emphasis, Wartofsky, 1979, p. 204). Children's development is supported by the tools and the interaction these tools afford. Within the social situation of play, the child's sense of the tools interacts with both the meaning and the play theme (Wartofsky, 1979, 1983).

In preschool children's play with toys, 4- to 5-year-old children experiment with the themes and content of the play scenario, and "children are encouraged to research and create new ways of using tools within certain societal limits" (Hedegaard, 2002, p. 45)<sup>3</sup>. In life as well as in play, artefacts such as toys remind us of the meaning and use of the artefact. Within the play setting, there is an interconnection between subjective processes and the activity setting that is mediated through the artefacts of toys. This is what Vygotsky (1989) calls *tools*, which mediate how to be and act in any particular activity setting. He exemplifies this understanding in the way the caregiver indicates the use of a stick as a horse during play (Vygotsky, this issue). By introducing the role of the meaning of artefacts as a focal point in activity, Vygotsky presented the idea that, during the play activity, it becomes possible to use one artefact for another, such as the way a stick is transformed into a horse and thereby becomes the pivot that enables the separation of "horse artefact" from "horse meaning". Play is "a novel form of behaviour in which the child's activity in an imaginary situation liberates him from situational constraints" (Vygotsky, this issue, p. 11). The meaning of an artefact has the potential to change in relation to its function outside of the play activity. This can lead to novel uses of an artefact, and these uses may violate rules and norms given outside or even within the play activity itself.

In situations where children are presented with toys, the environment's sense and meaning are part of the collection of artefacts and affords values and feelings that mediate certain ways of perceiving and acting in the play setting. In the playgroup study, the analytical distinction of toys was made based on their affordances, or the type of play they mediated. Two types of toys were presented to the children: toys that mediate creative construction play and toys that mediate social fantasy play<sup>4</sup>. When a toy affords its use, it is part of a complex of primary, secondary, and tertiary dimensions of the artefact (Wartofsky, 1979). Within the primary dimension of the artefact, the artefact can be taken as a tool; the secondary dimension of the artefact is a symbol/representation of the primary artefact; and the tertiary dimension takes the artefact as nonpractical, or emphasises the *artefactness* of the artefact. The tertiary dimension "constitute[s] a domain in which there is a free construction in the imagination of rules and operations different from those adopted for ordinary 'this-worldly' praxis" (Wartofsky, 1979, p. 209). In this third dimension, the artefact is perceived as something nonpractical. For example, the toy smartphone that is presented to the children can be used as a primary artefact, as a toy (not a real phone) to call people. For the children to use the toy phone, knowledge of the secondary dimension of the artefact becomes important as it refers to the mode of talking on the phone or the practice of using the phone, referring to the way a phone is used (calling, texting, or browsing the Internet). When using or seeing a phone, its aesthetic appearance as well as its function as a general metaphor for communication or as a tool, may evoke images afforded by its artefactness. This tertiary dimension, according to Wartofsky's theory, is where the toy opens up possibilities for the transformation of rules and functions in the normal practices of using a phone within the play scenario. A smartphone, as a toy, is available for calling whomever one wants or needs to call and for explaining why (secondary dimension), as well as potentially being that which

includes a remote control as a play-world (tertiary dimension). That is, within social fantasy play when using the play smartphones, the children imagine the use of the artefacts as the creation of an “arena for non-practical, or ‘free’ play- or game activity” (Wartofsky, 1979, p. 208). Within play, the mediation of (radical) alternatives to the familiar lies within the tertiary dimension of the artefacts.

Summing up, operationalised in the example of how children use a toy phone within the playgroup study, Wartofsky’s theory shows us how play offers developmental preconditions for imaginatively trying out suggestions (some of which might be transgressive) within play long before the child can do so in real life (Vygotsky, 2004). Here, it is argued that play allows children to work with the rudiments of ideas in the imagination before these ideas are offered in real life (like an architect working with models). The tertiary model of relation in the world suggests that children can externalise the model in the world through a communicative and/or productive act, which can then be presented, evaluated, and rejected in play or built upon by the playgroup. By acting out novel life forms, these forms become part of the child’s repertoire, which might be expressed or acted out in real-life situations.

## **The play project**

The playgroup project was a 4-month experimental research project that studied the influence of creative construction and social fantasy toys on children’s play. An ethnographic pre-study (Davies, 2008; Emond, 2006) took place prior to the experimental intervention a setup in which it was possible to observe whether children acted differently when playing with social fantasy toys or with creative construction toys. For example, whether there was a tendency to lean towards a communicative or productive introduction of novel ideas in relation to how transgressions of the play scenario and novelty were presented<sup>5</sup>.

To inquire into children’s play as part of their everyday life in kindergarten, the recruitment of comparable kindergartens was imperative. The kindergartens chosen were selected from a pool of 43 public kindergartens in a suburban area and were evaluated as comparable in relation to the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale Revised (ECERS-R) ratings from The Odense Preschool Study (TOPS), by the Centre for Research in Childhood Health, University of Southern Denmark (Sørensen, 2011), and in accordance with kindergarten records (Østerlund, Sawyer, & Kaziunas, 2010), family income, geographic location, pedagogical initiatives, and the value statements of the institutions<sup>6</sup>.

As seen in Figure 2, the design of the empirical study falls into three parts: an ethnographic pre-study (Davies, 2008; Emond, 2006), the experimental intervention, and a post-study.<sup>7</sup>

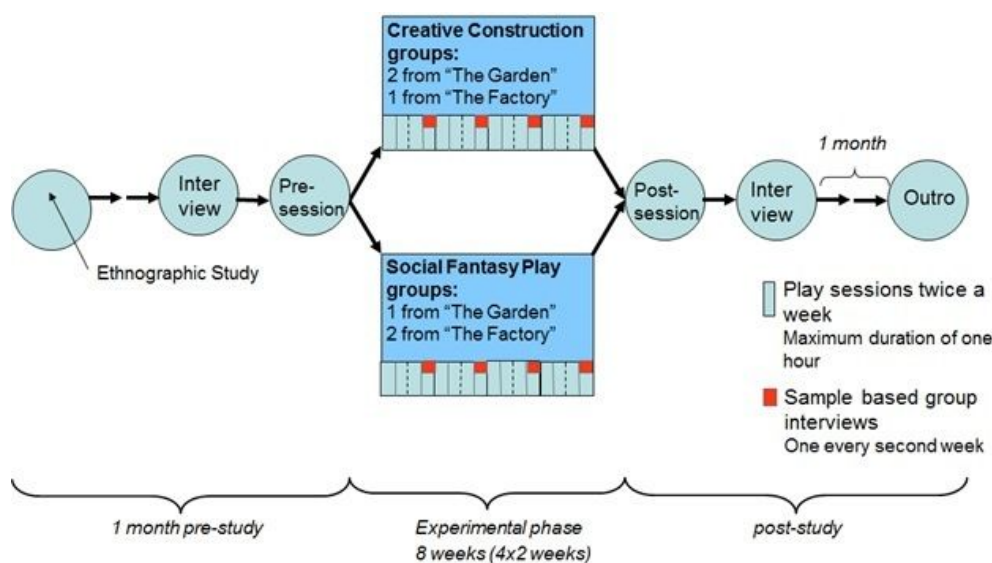


Figure 2. Overview of the empirical part of the study.

Thirty children participated in the playgroup project, 15 from each of the two kindergartens, here referred to as the Factory and the Garden. The boys were between 59–68 months old and the girls between 58–65 months old. In collaboration with kindergarten teachers, groups of five children were found suitable as being manageable. Kindergarten teachers were asked to form the groups, drawing on their knowledge of the children. They were asked to compose groups of two girls and three boys or three boys and two girls, and not to include close friends in the same groups, as studies of play and children's friendships show a close connection between the quality of play and children's immersion in play and friendship (Sawyer, 2009).

The research has found social fantasy play to be where creative activity is most readily produced with greater space to be playful than is the case in creative construction play, where children more frequently join smaller groups or play individually. The following analysis utilises an example from a playgroup session to present the emergence of a distinct type of play act and to make a practical foundation for a model of transgression. This is presented in two parts. First, an initial analysis is presented using the aforementioned theoretical conceptions of transgression. Second, based on this initial analysis, new concepts are introduced to deepen the analysis and emphasise the dynamic relation between play rules and play acts. The transformation of play can be said to move with a direction when a transformation of this dynamic relationship occurs. Thus, the play analysis embodies the movement of the play and explores the type of movement that occurs when the play scenario changes character. By focusing on the movement within play, a model of transgression emerge from the analysis, which demonstrates a way to observe novel acts as they unfold.

## An analysis of play

The analysis draws on Hedegaard's model of the dialectic relations between society, cultural traditions, institutional practices, activity settings, and children's engagement and intentions (Hedegaard, 2012a, 2012b)<sup>8</sup>. Children's staging of play (Schousboe, 1993) and their approach to the use of toys is examined to present a comprehensive perspective on the dynamic relations during play between children's activities of playing with soft toys and medical kits. Furthermore, novelty is emphasised in the analysis of the changes and shifts observed in both communicative and productive activity<sup>9</sup>. Transgression has been emphasised as an important concept to identify

novelty and expressions of imagined scenarios. Hence, part of the analysis involves identifying moments that show how communicative and productive play during the play session provide an understanding of how cultural and institutional demands lead to activities that are not given within the rules and traditions of the play scenario.

## A playgroup example

The extracted play session is from the kindergarten referred to as the Garden<sup>10</sup>. The theme for the toys introduced was teddy-bear hospital. The children were presented with highly realistic soft fabric baby animals from endangered species and play medical kits placed on a blanket in part of an open room in their kindergarten.

With regard to the affordances of the artefacts, the suggested theme lies in the combination of the presented toys (here, teddy bears and doctors' medical kits)<sup>11</sup>. At the time of the play session, the playgroup of Frida, Mogens, Silje, and Tine, who played with social fantasy toys, was in its fourth week, halfway through the 8-week experimental part of the study.

In the transcript (Table 1), emphasis was placed on playfulness and the sphere of staging, as this is where shifts and changes of play scenarios occur. Within the sphere of staging, children focus on staging and negotiating the play scenario. For the purpose of the analysis, comments are presented in relation to important sections of the observation.

**Table 1**

Transcript of play with social fantasy toys.

Line	Participant	Observation	Comments
1	Frida	"Oh, look at this!" She and Tine inspect and begin to play with the soft animals and the doctor kits.	initiates play
2	Mogens	"I'll examine this one."	enters the play
3	Tine	"Mogens, you are examining the animals, and then Silje, you are examining the humans."	staging
4	Silje	"But I examine both."	negotiation
5	Tine	"Yes, and Mogens does too." "But then they can come, two and two up to you guys and then Mogens examines when there is an animal that needs examining and then when there comes an..."	staging
6	Frida	Pees on a teddy. A wet area appears on her skirt.	transgress
7	Mogens	"Ugh, have you sucked on this one, ugh." Picks up the teddy.	shift
8	Tine	"Mogens examines the animals and then when a human comes..."	staging veterinarian
9	Frida	"Jedw!"	
10	Mogens	"Oh, it is wet. Where?"	
11	Frida	"There."	
12	Mogens	"Yeah!"	
13	Frida	"Ugh, that one we don't want, do we?"	
14	Mogens	"Noo!"	
15	Tine	"... and when a human comes in and needs a vaccination ..."	staging
16	Mogens	"No, you shall have this one." Throws the pee-teddy	shift transgress
17	Frida	"Yes, there is pee, here." Picks up the pee-teddy	shift / norm
18	Tine	"... and when a human comes in and needs a vaccination..."	staging



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19	Frida	"There!" Throwing the pee-teddy at Tine	transgress
20	Tine	"... then it is Frida taking care of them ..."	directs staging
21	Mogens	"It is actually fun to throw with," commenting on Frida throwing the pee-teddy at Tine. "Shall we throw with animals?"	shift
22	Mogens	Giggles and throws an animal	
23	Frida	"Yeah!" (Inviting Tine and Sille to the play) Mogens agrees.	
24	Tine	Sits and examines the snake, says to Mogens: "Your snake is finished!"	staging
25	Mogens	Throws a teddy	transgress
26	Tine	"Your snake is finished!" Yelling	shift
27	Mogens	Laughing	staging game aspect
28	Sille	"That's fun!" Takes the snake from Tine and join Frida and Mogens	accepts
29	Frida/Mogens	"It is fun."	
30	Mogens	"Now there is a pillow fight!" Throwing stuffed animals	staging
31	Tine	Laughs and throws the pee-teddy at Mogens	transgress
32	Tine:	"Everybody against everybody!"	shift
33	Mogens	"Everybody against everybody."	staging game aspect
34	Sille	"Here comes the snakeman and bites you." Introduces the snake to the play	accepts
35	Frida	"It is about not getting hit!"	staging
36	Mogens	"Yours should also be thrown, Frida."	shift
37	Frida	"Yeah, you were hit."	leading staging
38	Frida	"Oh yeah, I'm just too good, I'm just too good, I'm just too good, too goooooo!"	
39	Mogens	"Yeah"	change/ shift

The researcher consider terminating the session, aware of Frida's wet clothes, but the children eagerly continue the game. The researcher allows for the play to continue as no one notices or minds the wet patch on Frida's clothes, including Frida herself.

40	Mogens	"Hit, hit, hit," yelling, "she is still the one!"	introduce the game
41	Sille	"Oh, thirteen."	counting
42	Tine	"Your hit."	
43	Mogens	"You are still the one," he says to Frida.	leading
44	Frida	Taking the doctor kit	
45	Mogens	"Oh no, now we are teams!"	staging game aspects
46	Frida	beats Tine with a teddy	
47	Sille	"Now the snakeman will come and eat you." Continues hitting Tine using the snake	transgress
48	Tine	"Now I'm the one, now I decide, now everybody has to pee, pee, pee." Withdraws, singing and drumming with her hands, reintroduce pee.	conflict

The play continues with a new theme, houses, in which Mogens uses the teddies to build a house while the others choose places for houses.

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## **The play scenario is established: The movement**

The first step of a movement is the establishment of the play scenario. When approaching the teddies and the medical kits, the child interactants are engaged in entering the sphere of staging the play. They direct their focus to the sphere of staging and initiate a process of transforming traditions and social rituals into regulating rules within the doctor/veterinarian scenario (lines 3, 8, 15, 18, 20; hereafter referred to as “playing doctor”). These both limit and direct; that is, they afford certain activities that can be observed when the tradition of going to the doctor and veterinarian are combined. The veterinarian scenario is transformed to include both humans and animals (line 5), and the role of doctor and patient relationships is communicated (lines 24, 26). When Tine directs how animals and humans are looked after within different social rituals, the rules in the play are made explicit. She assigns roles to the other children (lines 3, 5) and clarifies what these roles entail.

## **Transformation of the play scenario**

Within the subsequent pillow fight, rules are created through the physical performance of the rules without objections from other children (lines 23, 25, 27, 28, 29). This becomes explicit when Mogens states, “Now there is a pillow fight!” (line 30). After the initial play scenario, a doctor play is established; for the play to continue, the focus turns to the sphere of imagination, where the children can play and perform the roles through their intentional activity. However, the subsequent activity of Frida and Mogens’ engagement in the play (lines 6, 7, 9, 10, 11) leads to a novel act that changes the affordances of the teddy bear<sup>12</sup>, which creates a need to locate the activity outside the traditions and rules of everyday practices. This occurs as Frida and Mogens investigate the possible meaning of the new object (line 10), which is seen in relation to the play scenario. Frida and Mogens (lines 11, 12) discard the teddy by gently throwing it to the side. The object is subsequently reintroduced into the play, affording itself as a throwing object (line 16), and introducing a change in the use of soft animals, opening up the space for the teddy to be thrown at Tine, who is still staging the doctor play (lines 15, 16, 18, 20, 24, 26). This leads to the game element (lines 19, 32, 40, 42, 43, 45) of throwing in the transformed play-game scenario. A play-game of throwing soft teddy animals is staged.

When play is considered as support for the development of creative thinking, playfulness becomes the starting point for theorising. Within playfulness lies the prerequisite for challenging the observed, establishing room to enable the shift from reality to a new sphere. Within transformative play, children playfully create and negotiate imaginative play scenarios. In the example, changes of the play scenario are observed during the session. In the following section dealing with concepts of transgression, transformative play is introduced to further analyse what happens as the play scenario changes.

## **Transgression in play**

In the above analysis, the movement from one play scenario to another is emphasised, and a description of the elements leading to this is identified. In the following section, a model is presented that incorporates these elements into a description of play that emphasises playfulness as the momentum of play. Furthermore, a conceptualisation of transformative play is introduced as being produced by a transgression of the acute play scenario, leading to a challenge of the play scenario. This entails a negotiation of the handling of transgression, which leads to either a new play scenario or a rejection of that act. In accordance with the model in Figure 3, playfulness can

be seen as the willingness for a movement in two directions: the willingness for initiatives and the negotiability of the play scenario.

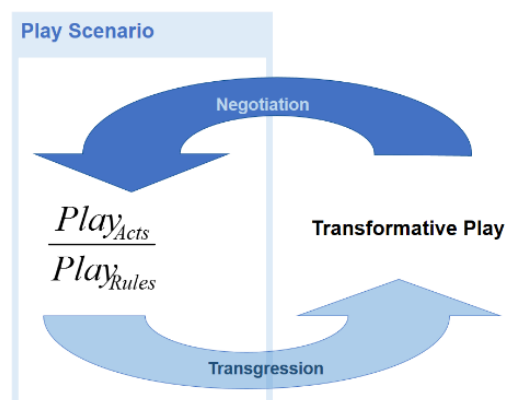


Figure 3. Model of transgression.

In the model, play is presented as a dialectical relation between a form and a set of actions. The form governing the play is referred to as the play rules, and the accompanying actions governed by the play rules are referred to as play acts. Thus, play activity as such is what happens in the dialectical relation between play rules and play acts. In the example of doctor play, the play rules are the tradition and cultural norms governing veterinarian/doctor activities. Hence, the play rules are the shared social agreements from society, cultural traditions, and institutional practices that are transformed by the players into regulating rules in the establishment of the play scenario. The performance of the play rules and play acts produces a play scenario that is embedded in a specific social setting, an activity setting in a kindergarten.

Returning to the example, to understand how different play scenarios evolve within play, we consider something to be a play activity when, in addition to the above-mentioned factors, it opens up possibilities for transgressions of the current play scenario, such as when the pee-teddy is thrown (line 16). It is worth noting that peeing on the teddy bear and then subsequently playing with it, is not seen as socially unacceptable by the children. Furthermore, this should not be seen as an attempt to provoke. In the above model, this act is referred to as a transgressive act which may be reacted upon and thereby change the previously established play scenario. The transgressive act with an accompanying negotiation is therefore referred to as transformative play, such as when Mogens and Frida negotiate the role of the teddy in the play scenario (lines 11, 12, 13, 14).

### Introduction of the playgroup example in the model

The types of activities that children expressed within the play setting of doctor refer to societal traditions. The children initiate doctor activities, such as taking a temperature and offering medicine. In the play scenario, the doctor offers medicine and gives vaccinations to animal and human patients.

Referring to Figure 3, play themes govern who does what within the play scenario, such as who is allowed to perform certain activities (e.g., the doctor makes the patient well). A set of activities is governed by the traditions the children have learned, which are appropriated in the play scenario as regulating rules of play by outlining and restricting possible activities. Play rules are understood in the broadest sense as the collective meanings within the current social

consciousness of play. From an institutional perspective, play rules are recurrent structures of tradition for play activities that occur in an institutional practice (Hedegaard, 2012b, p. 18). From the child's perspective, play rules are the recurrent social situations in which the child interacts with other persons through play activities (Hedegaard, 2012b, p. 18); thus, acts are in a dialectical relation to a practice form making up the activity.

## **Transformative play and transgressions**

In relation to the play scenario, an analytical concept is proposed that contains the possibility of transforming the play scenario. This is referred to as *transformative* play and is understood as an activity that is transgressed into from the play scenario, such as when Frida decides to urinate on the teddy (line 6). Actions in transformative play challenge the play scenario and lead to an evaluation of the action as spontaneous feedback to the play scenario. This feedback is reflected when the children negotiate whether the teddy should still be in the play (lines 11, 12, 13, 14) and when picking up the teddy from where it was temporarily placed and throwing it at Tine. An incorporation of the new action into the play scenario transforms it. This secures the continuation of play with the introduction of the new theme (a throwing game). This transgression leads to a reflective process and a negotiation occurs, such as an argument between the children. It leads to a minute pause in the play activity, with Mads and Frida leaving the teddy on the side. The rejection of a suggestion to transform a play scenario through negotiation has a constitutional effect on the play scenario, defining and confirming the rules negatively, such as when Sille attempts to introduce a counting aspect to the throwing play (line 41). This is ignored by Mads, Frida, and Tine, thereby negatively confirming that this is not play in which the children are counting.

## **Negotiating transgressions**

Children's engagement changes when they are participating in play. They may perform transgressive initiatives and these are constantly negotiated. For example, in lines 7–19, Mogens and Frida negotiate the new affordances of the teddy, leading to an action outside the given limits of the agreed-upon doctor play—a transgression of the play scenario of playing doctor. The act of throwing the teddies materialises as communication (“a pillow fight”, line 30) and production (the implicit rules of games being shown in aspects of being attacked, line 34) outside the limits of the doctor play scenario; the concrete observation demonstrating a process of negotiation by the child who says, “that one we don't want, do we?” (line 13). The possibilities of handling a transgression in play can be 1) a dismissal of the act (e.g., no teams were made, following the exclamation “everybody against everybody” [lines 32, 33]), thereby consolidating the play scenario; 2) an affirmation through an integration into the play scenario, such as when Sille says, “however, I want to do both [examine humans and animals]” (line 4). Thus, there is a movement of the play rules that existed prior to the transgression to new play rules, and the transgression leads to the development of the play rules for the play scenario; or 3) an affirmation establishes a new play scenario, which can be seen in the change of theme in the play activity from the doctor play to the game play and finally to the new play with houses.

Within the model, an analytical distinction of the functions of transgression is represented by the arrows and may present two levels of processes (Figure 3). The first level is exemplified by the child peeing on the teddy bear, which is a transgressive act. The second level represented by the top arrow is the wet teddy bear being presented and negotiated in social life. In play, children's

thinking can be observed as co-constructing this knowledge that mediates shared activity. For the pee-teddy to be part of the play, the meaning and use of it must be negotiated and agreed upon to allow the play scenario to continue.

### **Playfulness and its relation to the transformation of the play**

Playfulness, as noted earlier, is defined as the disposition (or wish) to play, which is a prerequisite for creativity (Wartofsky, 1979, pp. 207–209) that enables a shift in focus from one play scenario to the next. In the model described above, this definition is built upon to suggest an even wider use of this disposition: that by considering playfulness as a prerequisite for transgression that extends reality, it is possible to establish a play scenario. When Frida urinates on the teddy bear (line 6) and throws it (line 16), the play continues even though, from an adult perspective, neither is an acceptable activity. This is similar to the play scenario in Schousboe's example in which two girls try to make a third girl drink urine. The children's engagement in the play leads them to attempt to incorporate the pee-teddy in the play. In their first negotiation, they dismiss it as part of the play, but then they return to it having seen that it affords itself as a special throwing object. This new meaning of the object in combination with the engagement leads to the teddy becoming part of the play again in such a way that the play changes character. Here, a room allows for transformation of both the function of the perceived object and the other teddies, which feeds back into the play scenario, now becoming throwing play and later developing into a play game (line 31). Playfulness here can be understood to function in two dimensions: (a) as a prerequisite for transgressing the norms of the play scenario (introducing the wet teddy rather than the usual practice of leaving the play to get dry clothes), and (b) as a prerequisite for allowing transgressions (e.g., other children accepting the new perception of the pee-teddy and its role in the play scenario). In the first sense, playfulness opens up the play scenario for new and creative activities, such as perceiving pee as something to experiment with (in this case as a disgusting object, and in Schousboe's case as medicine). In the second sense, playfulness may be seen as an affirmation of the transgression, allowing it to transform the play scenario so that the transgression is included in the play scenario and ensuring that the play is not ruined. The continuation of playfulness involves a sense of willingness within the activity setting for transgressions as feedback on *negotiability*.

### **Discussion**

The wholeness perspective on play introduced here is structured by Hedegaard's (2012a) notion of the child's position in the activity setting. The example of the teddy bear and medic kit play scenario was used to analyse the development of play by focussing on transgressions of an established play scenario. Here, transgressions revealed opportunities to transform the play activity. The observations from the play project demonstrate the process when, in play, groups of children direct their focus to the sphere of staging and imagination. In this process of transforming traditions and social rituals into regulating rules, we can observe the limits and direction of certain activities within the playgroup. Some rules were made explicit through the assignment of roles and what these roles entailed, whereas other rules were created through the physical production of the rules (as proposed in the analysed example) without objections from other children. Children's playful suggestions are constrained by the play scenario, which is partly outlined by the toys as part of a cultural tradition in an activity setting. The toys and their uses simultaneously open up for and limit a variety of possible uses and play scenarios.

Creating a play project structured around Hedegaard's model of the child in society, drawing on a Vygotskian approach to play, and introducing Schousboe's analytical sphere model, revealed how social-fantasy toys constrain the play scenario outlined by toys and peers. To build on the scenarios, children need to have a predominant focus on the sphere of imagination in which toys emphasise different affordances in the play-world. Within the play setting, there are different types of interconnections between subjective processes and the activity setting mediated through artefacts (Wartofsky, 1979).

When playing, children create their own world, which is similar to the real world (including good and bad acts, such as power relations). If we consider the possibility of what Schousboe refers to as the spellbinding effect of the imaginative play-sphere, we can see that children's intentions<sup>13</sup> when playing dominating or gender-typed conflicts are not designed to hurt their peers but to play using their own references from previous experiences and societal traditions. This spellbinding effect is argued to lead to increased playfulness in which children readily transgress traditions and social rituals within new forms of play. With new models for the mediation of the world in play, rules are transgressed through the use of creative imagination and externalised and rearticulated in the play activity. These novel forms then become potential models for action when the children act within traditions in their normal settings. Thus, in remaking their own reality in the actual reality, playing children both destroy and establish social order (Sutton-Smith, 1997).

The analysis demonstrates that a comprehensive perspective on play and changes during play must take into account transgressions and negotiations of these transgressions. Transgression and novelty have been emphasised in the analysis of the transformations and shifts observed in both communicative and productive activity. The new meaning of an artefact that children may negotiate leads to a transformation of play activity, as demonstrated in the case of the teddy bear being used as a pee container<sup>14</sup>. Further, it is noted that creative acts are closely linked to the concept of transgression; this calls for a discussion and analysis of the concept of creativity which takes into account the notion of transgression while maintaining a conceptual difference between the two concepts. The concept of playfulness offers one way of delimiting creative acts from transgression.

To grasp playfulness within communicative and productive activities, the negotiation of creative proposals is conceptualised as observable within the scope of procedures of the analysis. In accordance with Hedegaard (this issue), traditions establish the rules within the play scenario, thereby inspiring and limiting possible activity within the activity setting of the play session. Playfulness is introduced in the model of transgression and observed when the child shows willingness to transgress given rules and norms as well as when the group shows a willingness to accept and negotiate these initiatives. In relation to transgressions, in an analysis of a concrete observation, which applies the presented model, the process of negotiating the act in question has been found to lead to the following:

- 1) a dismissal of the act, thereby consolidating the play scenario (a situation in which we cannot speak of a creative act because the transgression does not create anything new in the play scenario);
- 2) an affirmation through integration into the play scenario, thereby developing its play rules;
- 3) an affirmation establishing a new play scenario, which manifests itself as a change of theme in the play activity.

## Perspectives on the developmental potential of play – why keep playing?

As stated by Vygotsky (2004), “the actual emotional roots of the child’s imagination are as strong as those of the adult” (p. 34). This implies an eagerness to explore possible developmental paths, which has here been considered in relation to children’s play. When approaching development and the willingness to come up with transgressive initiatives, it might be appropriate to have the scope of possible developmental paths in mind. In any play situation, it is important to note the number of proposals and suggested acts that are affirmed and dismissed (and even those that are not used) in order to consider and appreciate the importance of a certain number of proposals. Even if such possibilities are not used, the presence of unexplored possibilities may serve an important role in the development of playful activities. In accordance with Hedegaard’s model of the child in institutional practices, redundancy with respect to possibilities of development and an experience of possible transgression of the governing structures may have a positive effect on people’s ability to develop as active, co-constructing participants in their culture and on their perception of the possibility of continuing to be co-constructors of their culture (Hedegaard, 2012a, Schousboe, 2013). The redundancy of possibilities plays an important role in possible meetings (such as a conversation) in a flexible and effective manner and demands both large and small changes in society and children’s development. Ensuring a surplus of potential development implies an overflow of probabilities in the sense of developmental potential. In principle, transgressive acts are desirable and can be regarded as a condition for maintaining a broader and more flexible spectrum for dealing with changes. In a Vygotskian approach, this may refer to the way creativity is bound to thinking and the crisis of subjective and objective imagination (Vygotsky, 2004).

This approach leads to an immediate reflection on the play project and on play in general with regard to how far children’s play can be regarded as possibly transgressing the “walls” of the kindergarten or experimental setting. Furthermore, as play is part of an institutional practice, the kindergarten practice of engaging children in structuring their activities by offering them experience of similar possibilities, as in play, may also speak to children’s play and the exploration of these frames in child-directed initiatives. Play offers the possibility to transgress the collective social consciousness and to try out different ways of transgressing it, and it seems that the evolving of play relies on the acceptance of transgressive acts. Transgressing morally accepted behaviour obviously involves antisocial experiences that accumulate and build upon how others are perceived and how physical objects can be handled. It would be interesting to conduct further studies of the dialectical relations between these.

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<sup>1</sup> Although the term was coined by Gibson (1977), it will be used here as a clarification of Wartofsky’s theory of perception in accordance with Gibson’s original use to broaden its meaning so that it is also seen as the demands by both objects and persons.

<sup>2</sup> Schousboe overcame the problem of understanding children as either being in or out of play by introducing an analytical spheres model, wherein we are always focused on a particular dimension of reality, one of these being imaginative. Furthermore, imagination relies on children’s development of a play scenario which is co-created, rather than on the individual’s cognitive development as is the case with, for example, Piaget who argues that creative imagination is an ability that spontaneously arises in the *egocentric stage* when the child plays alone (Piaget, 1962).

<sup>3</sup> The term *scenario* is here introduced within Hedegaard’s (2002, 2012a, 2012b) activity setting. The play scenario is constructed as the dialectical relationship between the play form and the play acts.

<sup>4</sup> In relation to child development and values such as pro- and anti-gun toys, which have been heavily debated and contested ideologically and educationally, such themes have been seen as less important in the categorisation of toys

(as suggested by the example of children playing fishing boats with dinosaurs, which are usually presented as fierce dragon like creatures with sharp teeth). Within cultural-historical theory, children relate to the cultural traditions and institutional practices of their contemporaries for themes, rules, and roles while playing.

<sup>5</sup> Wartofsky (1979, p. 204) makes an analytical distinction between communication and production.

<sup>6</sup> All Danish kindergartens must explicitly formulate a statement of their values.

<sup>7</sup> For an elaboration of the design, please refer to Møller, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Children's play activities are said to unfold in the activity setting and in the institutional practices of kindergarten, which have a history embodied in the traditions and are framed by societal conditions.

<sup>9</sup> When playfulness makes room for violations of the setting, leading to transformative play.

<sup>10</sup> All names are pseudonyms. The geographic considerations and selection processes of the kindergartens are not discussed here to ensure the privacy of the participants.

<sup>11</sup> Some of the children's parents in each kindergarten worked at the local hospital, and the kindergarten therefore had visitors from and visits to the hospital. Web information and posters in the common areas in the kindergarten establish the arrangement of teddy bear hospital days as part of the "curriculum".

<sup>12</sup> According to Wartofsky, artefacts (here, toys) afford themselves to the children. Meaning, within Vygotsky's object-meaning relation, is given to the artefacts by the children.

<sup>13</sup> An *intention* is defined by Hedegaard (2008) as a meaningful orientation towards an object that the child finds important.

<sup>14</sup> Through a perceptual feedback loop, the perception of the artefactness of an object leads to an off-line mode, which, in relation to the already given functions of an artefact (soft fabric), functions relatively autonomously and connects with the perceptual feedback loop in relation to the primary and secondary dimensions of the artefact through a communication, a production, or both.



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